

KONKANI - A LANGUAGE ON THE MOVE..

- Saratchandra Shenoi

Browse through the histories of Indian languages and you are bound to notice a conspicuous difference between the history of Konkani and that of other languages. Where other languages have enjoyed a geographical stability, the distinguishing feature for Konkani is a recurring mobility. This peculiarity makes the study of its history a difficult and cumbersome effort. On the other hand, it makes the same effort a unique and interesting experience.

All studies of Indian history and culture, irrespective of the period being discussed, usually prefer to take up the northern and the peninsular regions separately. This is because of the marked differences in the environments of these regions. The difference has long been established even by the prehistoric tool-traditions of these two regions. Natural environment has indeed a fair influence upon the culture of a people. This is true for their language also, because the language of a people is an essential part of their culture. A simple comparison between the languages, as also of the cultures, of world's extreme climates would bear sufficient proof of this fact. On the other hand, the living languages of today are mostly secondary ones having undergone many permutations and combinations through the centuries. The present day Konkani too belongs to this category like many of its sister languages. Even though the origin of Konkani could be traced back to an ancient past, and even though the language still bears the stamp of that period, the nature of modern Konkani makes it impossible to limit its study either to northern or to peninsular India. Modern Konkani actually stands as a link between the two regions; historically as well as linguistically.

Ancient Roots

Though its name links it to the well-defined region of Konkan, the actual roots of Konkani are not so obvious. There was an extensive period when Konkani did not have that name even. It was referred as the 'Language of the Brahmins'. Language experts and historians hold this language in synonymy with the ancient Saraswat Brahmins of northern India.

Saraswat Brahmins originally inhabited the region flanked by the rivers Saraswati and Dhrishadvati since Vedic times. This tract is described as Brahmvarta in the Manusmriti. The river Saraswati and its banks are described in Rigveda also. The chapter Saraswatakhyana in the Shalya Parva of Mahabharata describes the ancient heritage of the Saraswats. It describes also the 12-year long drought-hit famine, and as to how Sage Saraswata had initiated sixty thousand disciples to the Vedas, Sastras and Samskaras. Reference to this is found elsewhere too; like in Gadaa Parva of Mahabharata, in Sahyadri Khanda of Skanda Purana, in Sootasamhita, and in Bhudha Charita of Aswaghosha.

A People on the move

The time of their migration to the south and the route which they took is very important. Sri. V. N. Kudva in his 'History of the Dakshinatya Saraswats' (1972) lists several surmises regarding both. While there is general consensus regarding the major migration during the fifth century, some pointers definitely hint at earlier batches migrating during the third century. There is also evidence of some subsequent batches moving south during a much later period, up to eleventh century. The routes taken by these batches are also different. The surmise is that while the earliest batch of the third century may have come directly from the original Punjab region, the major batch of the fifth century had come from Tirhut in Bihar, a region which they seem to have occupied for about twenty generations!

These migrants were indeed a distinct ethnic group and they had a language of their own. Since that period is denoted as the period of Middle Indo Aryan languages, it is only proper to assume that theirs was a Northern

Prakrit of their own. Prakrits were strong and sturdy languages with their own characteristics and each Prakrit bore the individuality of the ethnic group which it represented, or else it had a base region to which it belonged. Magadhi Prakrit relates to Magadh (a region) as Ardhamagadhi relates to the Jains (a people). Pali relates to Budhists while Souraseni and Maharashtri are associated with those respective regions. However, very few scholars allot individuality to the language of the migrating Saraswats. In view of their distinct ethnicity and socio-cultural identity, it clearly stands to reason that theirs was a distinct Prakrit of their own. We find only Dr. S. R. Dalgado (1855-1922) opining thus - 'In all probability, it (language of Saraswats) represents the Saraswati language, which the Orientalists consider extinct and which the emigrants of Trihotra or Tirhut introduced into Konkan.'

Attaining New Identity

Thus the mother-tongue of those migrants, ancient and ethnic though it was, had slowly assimilated other language characteristics through social co-existence lasting several centuries. (It could be understood how that linguistic osmosis had taken place from a similar but more recent history of Keralite Konkani. Living in Kerala for the past several centuries and generations they have assimilated a good deal from Malayalam language.) The long intervals between migrations that occurred several times had seen to the making of the Modern Konkani language. The name of the language, no doubt, was acquired from the region of their new dwelling – The Konkan.

It is very significant to note that the internationally acclaimed linguist, Prof. S. M. Katre was unable to classify this language fully into any of the established groups of Middle Indo Aryan languages. After extensive analysis of the phonology, morphology and syntax, he concluded thus: 'The phonological data shows that so far as the earliest innovations are concerned, Konkani agrees with the South-West Group in the majority of its characteristics and partially with the Central Group when there is a divergence between these two groups.'

Linguistic Osmosis

It is very common that every new generation borrows and coins some new words, phrases and figures of speech, no matter what their language is. In this light it is only normal that Konkani acquired a few hundred words from the languages of the regions it passed through. This was especially so because that 'passing through' had actually taken the span of several generations. However, we need to remember that it is the grammar that distinguishes and characterizes a language and not its vocabulary. Hence, the ancient Gujarati and Marathi vocables found in Konkani by Dr. Chavan and Dr. Katre indicate only that Konkani had a long stay in those regions at some period of time.

Some Aberrations

However, during a later period, Konkani was influenced by unnatural modifications. The natural growth of the language was arrested for a some period when Goa came under foreign rule. Till then the languages that influenced Konkani were but its sister languages. Moreover, the influence was limited, gradual and natural. It was a case of give and take rather than just one-way borrowal. The advent of the Portuguese is considered a critical stage to the Konkani region and the Konkani language. What followed was devastation. Dr. Katre observes - 'While Konkani successfully resisted the influences of its more powerful neighbours in the Indian field and preserved in tact its phonology and morphology, it was not so successful in its fight against the Portuguese.'

From that critical point of time the growth of Konkani could only be termed unnatural. The Konkani people too were subjected to many changes in a drastic way. To dwell upon the history of that period is not at all pleasant. On the brighter side, this informs us in no uncertain manner as to how the language of a people is an inseparable part entwined with their culture and identity.

The Ethnic Transplant

The Konkani of Kerala and Karnataka are a transplanted ethnic group. While the time of their first appearance in these places could be anybody's guess, the real migration is known to have taken place during the Portuguese rule of Goa. That mass migration which took place in the latter half of the sixteenth century was indeed an Exodus, because the threat to the existence and identity of those Konkani was very real and the journey that they undertook was indeed hazardous.

Indications of Antiquity

The royal inscriptions at the foot of the famous monolithic statue of Gommatesha (Bahubali) at Shravanabelagola (Karnataka) are in Konkani written in Nagari and are dated as early as 981 AD. The famous 17th century botanical encyclopedia Hortus Malabaricus, though it is in Latin, contains several hundred native names of plants, creepers and trees in Konkani. The names appear in Nagari script as well as Roman script, though the language is named as 'Lingua Bramanica'. It also contains a testimonial in the same 'Lingua Bramanica', signed jointly by three Konkani physicians of Kochi.

A key observation made by Dr. Katre should be enough of an indication of the antiquity of this language. In his famous research book, The Formation of Konkani, he observes that some plural forms of the type phal-am of the Konkani language could only be traced back to the neutral plural forms of Vedic period. The Rigveda contains such forms in abundance. The case of desinential vowels too is referred at many junctures in the book, with reference to a variety of phonological peculiarities. The presence of the same in southern Konkani is established as retention from that ancient past. Moreover, its presence has been observed in the 16th century Konkani Mahabharat of Krishnadas Shama.

National Recognition

Though Konkani was recognized as a developed literary language by the Central Sahitya Akademi in 1975, national recognition came rather late. Konkani was included in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India in 1992 only. However, Konkani won the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 2006. It was bestowed on the veteran Konkani essayist, *Padmabhushan Ravindra Kelekar* of Goa.

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